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THREE TURNING POINTS THAT LED TO THE BIRTH OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

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At each point—1897, 1917, and 1947—one Jewish leader appeared, and showed greatness.

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"I would like to begin with the strange fact that the state of Israel exists." That is how the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, speaking in 1953, introduced his address to a Zionist association. Today, the existence of Israel is more likely to be taken for granted by Zionists. But in fact, for sheer unexpectedness, few turns of history can compete with it.

David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann in 1949. Getty Images.

As Berlin saw it, the birth of Israel "upset materialist theories of history," serving instead as "a living witness to the triumph of human idealism and willpower over the allegedly inexorable laws of historical evolution." Perhaps this helps to explain some of the passions that still surround Israel: its existence refutes too many grand theories.

If the rise of Israel is a testament to human willpower, then any explanation of it must appeal to individual manifestations of will. But many theorists insist that focusing on such manifestations—on, in effect, "great men"—is a tabloid version of history. Real history, we are assured, is made by the masses, by movements, by great subterranean forces. And before the rise of Israel, we were also instructed that precisely these same forces worked *against* any

such rise happening.

The greatest of those forces was the anomalous situation of the Jews. Dispersed for two millennia, they had survived only on a combination of memory and faith. Therefore, as Berlin put it, they "could not be defined in terms of the ordinary definition of nations." Arnold Toynbee, the British philosopher of history, gave up trying to fit them into his civilizational schema altogether. He simply called the Jews "an extinct society which only survives as a fossil."

Because the scattered Jews weren't like other nations, the birth of Israel also took place in a peculiar way: it started on paper. "Israel is a freak," insisted the Jewish writer Arthur Koestler. "It is a kind of Frankenstein creation, conceived on paper, blue-printed in the [British] Mandate, hatched out in the diplomatic laboratory." For the Jewish state to arise, a whole people had to move itself across continents by land and sea, had to learn to speak one language, and how to defend itself. Moreover, success required some modicum of grudging world support for the Jews, the most despised and vulnerable of peoples.

How improbable was *that*? All of it augured for failure.

Nor could a Jewish state ever have come into being by accident: too many things had to fall into place, too many things had to go right, which in turn would require sustained leadership —not of one person, but of many. Although many nations could point to one providential figure—a Cavour, a Bismarck, an Atatürk—who led it through crisis to rebirth, one such leader would hardly have sufficed to create a Jewish state from scratch. The project required too many preliminary and intermediate stages.

And yet it happened, and it happened precisely through the manifestation of individual willpower.

In this process, three turning points stand out: the First Zionist Congress at Basel in 1897; the Balfour Declaration in 1917; and Israel's Declaration of Independence in 1948. Had there been a failure at any of these three points in time, it is possible that there would be no Jewish state today.

Moreover, each of these turning points hinged upon the resolve and action of one leader: for the Zionist Congress, Theodor Herzl; for the Balfour Declaration, Chaim Weizmann; for the Declaration of Independence, David Ben-Gurion.

Other names might be added to the pantheon of "founders." But leadership isn't just a matter of genius. It depends on opportunity. And chance also plays an oversized role. One promising Zionist genius (Aaron Aaronsohn) goes down in a plane over the English Channel in 1919, another (Chaim Arlosorov) is shot dead on a Tel Aviv beach in 1933, still another (Vladimir

Jabotinsky) is felled by a heart attack in the Catskills in 1940: sometimes history rolls the dice.

It is also crucial to remember that Herzl, Weizmann, and Ben-Gurion shined only for an hour. They weren't endowed with infallible judgment, they all made mistakes, they all had cogent critics, and they all finished very much on a low note. In that respect, biography, giving us the whole arc of a life with its moments of doubt, disappointment, and despair, doesn't always do them justice. What is important to history are only the finest hours.

One can debate whether these three men, whose deeds I'll assess below, deserve to be called Israel's greatest, period. But at each turning point, by accident or design, they *alone* were positioned to take decisive action—and took it. Had they failed, the fate of Zionism, and that of the Jewish people, might have been forever altered.

If one were going to write a play about Israel's founders, and it had to have only the customary three acts, how might it unfold?

Act One: It is August 29, 1897, and we are in the concert hall of the Basel Municipal Casino. Theodor Herzl, journalist, playwright, self-appointed visionary of a Jewish return to Zion, has summoned Jews from around the world to a Zionist congress.

Herzl himself is a latecomer to the Zionist idea; there were already associations of "Lovers of Zion" and Jewish settlements in Palestine. But he thinks they've moved too slowly: "infiltration" into Palestine through settlement is time-consuming, and the situation of Jews in Europe is dire.

And Herzl should know: he lives and works in emancipated Western Europe, and even there the Jews are targeted. How much worse must their predicament be in the east, in the Russian empire, including Poland? The solution, he believes, lies in the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Zionists should seek a charter for such a state from the sultan of Turkey as well as a pledge of protection from a consortium of European powers.

Eighteen months earlier, Herzl had written a short book, *The Jewish State*, advancing this proposal. Nothing in the career of the man suggested he had it in him. Some thought it a joke; others, a symptom of madness. Those already involved in Zionist work deemed it presumptuous. The "moneyed" Jews, on whom he had already tried out his idea, dismissed him.

Now he has called this congress of Zionists. He would have preferred to hold it in Munich, but the Jewish grandees there wouldn't hear of it. Basel was a second choice. But who would come?

Amazingly, nearly 200 "delegates" have assembled, a few from as far away as America. Most

are Russian or have some Russian background—people Herzl doesn't even know. But this Zionist-come-lately has captivated them. Much of it has to do with his noble bearing, his impeccable manners, his brooding eyes. A delegate to the congress writes: "This is no longer the elegant Dr. Herzl of Vienna; it is a royal descendant of David arisen from the grave."

Herzl grasps his effect on "the little people." "The people are sentimental," he writes, they "do not see clearly." But they respond to his message because, he notes, "it is the simple and fantastic that leads men."

Simple indeed is his stirring message to the congress: the time for a Jewish state has arrived. He proposes a program, to be known as the Basel Program, whose first principle, in its final form, is revolutionary. "Zionism seeks to secure for the Jewish people a publicly recognized, legally secured home in Palestine."

To achieve this end, the delegates agree to "the unification and organization of all Jewry" into what Herzl describes as a representative "national assembly," and they empower him to undertake "steps to obtain the consent of various governments." Zionism will now have an official foreign policy. Thus does the Zionist movement become the Zionist organization, and a state in gestation.

Herzl is elated. He famously confides to his diary these words: "At Basel I founded the Jewish state. If I said this out loud today, I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years, perhaps, and certainly in 50 years, everyone will perceive it." As he writes these words, there are only about 50,000 Jews in the Land of Israel, fewer than half of one percent of the world's Jews.

By the time Herzl died in 1904 at the age of only forty-four, his objective seemed no closer to realization. His own diplomacy was a failure. He had met the German Kaiser and the Ottoman sultan, but made no headway with either one. Desperate, he'd allowed himself to be sidetracked by a British scheme for Jewish settlement in East Africa—a mistake that nearly toppled the organization he had created. Herzl understood the obstacle perfectly well: the doddering Ottoman empire had refused to collapse.

The empire may have been the "sick man of Europe," but Herzl was sicker than it was, and he went first. But he also saw that eventually it would go, and the Zionist institutions created by him ensured that when it did, Zionists would be in the anterooms and the cabinet rooms and at the palaces where the peace conferences would reorder the world.

In a speech many decades later, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would ponder what might have happened "had Herzl not died in 1904." But Herzl's achievement was precisely to organize Zionism so that it wouldn't need a messianic savior like himself—just the right people in the right place at the right time.

Act Two: We are at just such a right place, at just such a right time. It is October 31, 1917. The address: Number 10 Downing Street, just outside the Cabinet Room. Inside, the British War Cabinet is meeting. Outside waits Chaim Weizmann, the right man.

Britain is at war with the Ottoman empire, a grueling contest marred by retreats and defeats at Gallipoli and Mesopotamia. But now the British have the upper hand, and they are beginning to roll up the Ottomans on multiple fronts—including Palestine. What will become of it? Will it go to Britain? To the French, who've also staked a claim? To the vanguard of the Arab Revolt out of Arabia? To the local Arabs, who form an overwhelming majority of the population?

There is already a secret agreement, the so-called Sykes-Picot accord, accommodating the interests of everyone—everyone, that is, but the Zionists. And the formal Zionist organization can do little about it: it has been neutral in this war, hesitant lest it find itself on the losing side.

Chaim Weizmann, a Russian-born, German- and Swiss-educated chemist, has been in England since 1904, teaching chemistry in Manchester. He isn't a major player in the Zionist organization, but he is a British subject, not bound by wartime neutrality. He has worked as a man possessed, behind the scenes, with one purpose: to persuade the British government to issue to the Jewish people the promise of a Jewish state in Palestine. The idea has allies, including Arthur Balfour, the British foreign secretary, and the Middle East troubleshooter Mark Sykes. But it also has powerful opponents both in and out of the cabinet, some of them Jewish.

Much spadework has preceded this day. And Weizmann hasn't done it all himself: Nahum Sokolow, Aaronsohn, and Jabotinsky have also put their shoulders to the wheel. But Weizmann has been the point man. What is his advantage? Isaiah Berlin again puts it best. Weizmann, he writes, had

> this extraordinary capacity for creating the illusion that there existed a fully formed nationality whose true elected representative *he* was, that there was not only a nation but very nearly a state . . . (when everyone knew that this was not the case). . . . By behaving as he did, he cast a spell upon foreign statesmen and assimilated Jews alike.

Richard Crossman, the British parliamentarian, on meeting Weizmann, would describe him as "a personality who combined the fanaticism and power of Lenin with the sophisticated charm of Disraeli."

Weizmann has claimed to represent two constituencies: a vast and influential Zionist network, extending even to America, which can help Britain win the war; and the desperate masses of five million Russian Jews who, if they have no outlet in Zion, might swamp Europe

as refugees. The British empire knows how to calculate its interests, and it's not Weizmann's charm that convinces Balfour to issue the declaration bearing his name. But the British calculation of interests also rests on an inflated impression of Zionism that Weizmann has created.

We rejoin Weizmann outside the Cabinet room. The door opens; there appears Mark Sykes, who proudly announces: "Dr. Weizmann, it's a boy!" The War Cabinet has approved the Balfour Declaration. Its operational clause: "His Majesty's Government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object."

Of course, there is ambiguity here: what *is* a "national home"? Indeed, what is "Palestine"? As yet, it has no borders. And Britain doesn't yet dispose of Palestine. The Zionists had hoped for something more explicit. "I did not like the boy at first," Weizmann would write in his memoirs. "He was not the one I had expected. But," he adds, "I knew that this was a great departure."

To Act Two, an additional scene might be added. Weizmann repairs that evening to his Chelsea apartment. There he is joined by a small circle of friends. So elated are they that they begin to sing and dance to a hasidic tune. Later, when the news is announced, "singing and dancing erupted in the streets of the East End" of London. So recalled the father of the historian Simon Schama, to which Schama adds: "Something providential had happened, but also something against the odds."

Indeed, we can make sense of the Balfour Declaration only in the alternative universe created by Weizmann in the British imagination. Even there, to quote Arthur Koestler again, the Balfour Declaration was "an act dangerously outside the cautious routine of diplomacy. The whole thing was unorthodox, unpolitic, freakish." Or, as Abba Eban would later put it, the Balfour Declaration scaled "mountainous obstacles of rationality."

In 2017, on the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, some supporters of Israel would discount its significance, as if Israel, or an Israel, would have arisen without it. In any case, they pointed out, the British later betrayed the Declaration's promise, so why celebrate it?

But absent the Balfour Declaration and the postwar British Mandate in Palestine, there could have been no mass immigration. At the outset, the Jews were only a tenth of the population of Palestine. In 1923, Jabotinsky wrote that the yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, could "develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native [Arab] population—behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach." It was the British who initially formed the "iron wall" of Zionism, and the Balfour Declaration constituted the pledge that Weizmann would wave aloft whenever the British wavered.

Ultimately, the British did renege on that pledge. It took Weizmann too long to acknowledge this fact— as egregious an error on his part as the East Africa plan had been on Herzl's, and one that resulted in Weizmann's being shunted aside. But his shining hour in 1917 had given the yishuv the small margin it needed to grow tenfold and cross the half-million mark.

Many observers still thought this number couldn't possibly be enough to sustain a state. Besides, while there may have been 600,000 Jews in Palestine by the end of World War II, the six million who most desperately needed their own state had been destroyed by Hitler in Europe.

But that brings us to Act Three.

We are in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art—not the present one, but its predecessor on the lower end of Rothschild Boulevard. The date is Friday, May 14, 1948. A crowd has already assembled outside: rumor has it that here, on this, the last day of the British Mandate, the Jewish state will be proclaimed.

The day has been preceded by marathon deliberations among the yishuv's leaders, headed by David Ben-Gurion, the Russian-born pioneer turned trade unionist turned prime minister in waiting.

The hall is packed; Ben-Gurion arrives in his car and gives a crisp salute to a policeman at the door. Once inside, he opens the proceedings. There are no speeches, only Ben-Gurion's reading of the declaration of statehood. Its key passage:

> By virtue of our national and historic right and on the strength of the Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, we hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Yisrael, to be known as the State of Israel.

As I showed last year in an essay in *Mosaic*, there was never really any question that the yishuv would declare independence upon the end of the Mandate. But the genius of Ben-Gurion lay in his use of the declaration to dissociate the new state from the narrow borders envisioned by the 1947 UN partition plan, borders that excluded Jewish Jerusalem and left the Jewish state dangerously vulnerable.

There would be a war, Israel would pay a heavy price in blood, and so why not redraw the borders and make them defensible? The partition plan's borders had emboldened the Arabs to invade; perhaps other, better borders would deter them in the future.

Ben-Gurion had accepted the principle of partition as early at 1936, but not any *plan* of partition. Early drafts of the independence declaration committed Israel to the UN borders; Ben-Gurion took all that out. The result: Israel not only arose, it did so in the larger and more

viable borders afforded by war, and with a part of Jerusalem in its hands.

Ben-Gurion's diary for that day is full of military matters. Then it ends laconically, with these words:

> At four o'clock in the afternoon, we declared independence. The nation was jubilant—and I mourn in the midst of the rejoicing. Our fate is in the hands of the defense forces.

He certainly didn't think the war for Israel's independence would be a walkover. But in his shining hour, Ben-Gurion exemplified the approach that would be identified with his name. He had come as a young pioneer in 1906, and more than four decades in the land had given him a strategic focus on the vital importance of the future state's borders.

Ben-Gurion left no written manifesto or coherent memoir. His diary is a boring recital of logistical details. In Arthur Hertzberg's anthology of essays and documents on the Zionist idea, Ben-Gurion receives only two pages out of more than 600. What Ben-Gurion did write, and beautifully, was Israel's map. And what he built was Israel's ability to project its power beyond its frontiers, so that it need never retreat from them.

Ben-Gurionism wasn't an idea. In its most articulated physical form, it was the nuclear reactor at Dimona.

Act Three ends with the establishment of Israel, a fifty-year project accomplished by the Jewish people thanks to three perfectly timed interventions. Herzl convened a congress. Weizmann elicited a declaration. Ben-Gurion drew a map. It was an overlapping progression; together, they made a state.

This achievement tends to be obscured by two kinds of negative assessment. The first came from the leaders themselves. Herzl didn't hand a baton to Weizmann, and Weizmann didn't hand one to Ben-Gurion. Quite the opposite.

In 1903, Weizmann spurned Herzl over the East Africa plan. "Herzl is not a nationalist," rued Weizmann, "but a promoter of projects." And in 1936, Ben-Gurion concluded that "Weizmann is dangerous to Zionism." The history of Zionism and Israel is rife with personal rivalries and recriminations. While they need to be recounted, one effect of recounting them is to diminish the stature of all three men.

There is also, second, a universal tendency to judge "founding fathers" by contemporary standards, and to find them wanting. On close examination, their flaws come into focus, and they are discovered not to have shared some value we happen to regard as paramount. In the case of Israel, this critique has been taken to its farthest extreme by the so-called post-

Zionists, who have issued indictments and even guilty verdicts against all three.

No historical figure, however venerated, should be above exacting scrutiny. But this approach obscures precisely the virtues that inspired each individual's most decisive actions. In other words, it explains nothing, least of all how Israel came to be.

So is it possible, now, to arrive at a fair assessment of Israel's "founding fathers"? Soon enough, all three men will be beyond the living memory of anyone. Already, for most Israelis, their names mean not persons but places: a street, an airport, a research institute. But with the final subsiding of personal passions, Israel's Independence Day, celebrated this year on Thursday May 9, should be seen as an opportunity to reflect thoughtfully on the role of individual willpower in the fate of nations. The issue won't be resolved, but posing it will remind us of one more astonishing aspect of Israel's birth. Whenever, by a twist of fate, modern history demanded the appearance of just the right Jew lest Israel be lost, that Jew appeared and, for that moment, showed greatness.

This, to echo Isaiah Berlin, is "a strange fact," but a fact all the same. We must never take it for granted, and the story deserves to be told on each anniversary of Israel's birth. First, because it's true. Second, to remind us that at some time in the future, such Jews may be needed again.

This essay, in somewhat different form, was delivered as a talk at the Jewish Leadership Conference held in New York City in October 2018.